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SUBJECT: TRAINING CATHOLIC PRIESTS IN NORTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A. Hanoi 073 B. HO CHI MINH 468

1. (U) SUMMARY. Hanoi's Catholic seminary offers training to over 200 would-be priests over a seven year period. Local Committees on Religious Affairs screen out some candidates, allegedly on grounds of "personal conduct." Virtually all graduates become priests; a small percentage is able to continue religious training overseas. No foreign professors are allowed. The Church seeks to open another seminary in the north, in Thai Binh province, but remains hampered by a long-standing impasse on opening a seventh seminary, in southern Dong Nai province. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The spacious grounds of the downtown Hanoi Catholic Cathedral house one of Vietnam's six Catholic seminaries to train the next generation of priests. Occupying both a century-old building constructed as a seminary during the French colonial era and a more recent adjacent structure, the seminary (now on summer recess) provides a six-year training program for priests from 8 northern dioceses. New students are admitted every other year; entrance tests for the new cycle beginning in 2004 will be given in September 2003.

3. (U) 212 students are currently enrolled in the seminary, although no more than about 170 are in Hanoi during the school year, given the requirement for a 9-12 month work practicum after the six years of classroom training. (Students are also expected to intern at their home churches during the summer holidays.) The Hanoi seminary is second in size only to the Ho Chi Minh City seminary.

4. (SBU) According to Ngo Quang Kiet, concurrently Hanoi Seminary Director, Hanoi Apostolic Administrator, and Bishop of Lang Son (ref a), numbers of students have increased substantially from 1978, when the seminary re-opened after an 18 year gap in training. Only nine students were in the first class, he recalled, but the 2002 class has 55 would-be priests. He admitted that the local Committees on Religious Affairs have an important role in the screening process; for the 2002 class, various Committees (apparently at the provincial level) screened out 15 individuals, mostly for "personal conduct" issues. He stressed that family background or "political" stances were not/not a factor.

5. (U) Would-be students must first be recommended by local priests, and then pass a standard day-long test, mostly dealing with religious knowledge and expertise in either English or French. Virtually all students have completed a four year undergraduate university degree program; 2/3 of them typically have majored in foreign language (with the bulk of them having studied English rather than French). The usual maximum age for entry is 30. After the recommendations and successful tests comes the scrutiny by the local Committees on Religious Affairs, which also assess the students for suitability upon graduation, according to Bishop Kiet.

6. (SBU) About ninety percent of all graduates become priests (and virtually all return to their home diocese), but Bishop Kiet declined to describe whether the other 10 percent fail academically or are ruled out by local authorities. No more than 5 percent of the graduates are able to gain scholarships for foreign study, mostly in the Philippines, Italy, and France. None from the north have gone to the U.S. for study, due to a lack of available scholarships, but Bishop Kiet confirmed that some U.S. scholarships exist for seminary graduates in the south. Essentially all students come from Catholic families, he noted; he could not recall any case of a convert entering the seminary. Nor could he recall any student ever having been a member of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Unlike universities and other secondary and tertiary schools in Vietnam, there is no chapter of the Ho Chi Minh Youth Federation at the seminary, he added.

7. (U) 23 religious teachers conduct the classes, all of which are mandatory, including one new course on bioethics as well as standard classes on church law, music, and psychology. There are no courses yet offered on management. (Computers are available for common use, and there is

optional training on computer use.) Only three professor-priests are resident here, however; Bishop Kiet said that the other 20 rotate among the various other Catholic seminaries, giving a month's course here, a month's course there. A cadre from the Ministry of Education also conducts a four-year required course on "civil education." Bishop Kiet admitted that Ho Chi Minh thought and Marxist/Leninist ideology are a component of this course, but stressed "only a little." Most of the course is devoted to Vietnamese culture and law, he claimed.

18. (SBU) No foreign professors teach at the seminary, Bishop Kiet confirmed. He said that the Church had requested permission from the Government Committee on Religious Affairs "about ten years" ago to bring in a foreign professor, but this was denied. The Church has not asked a second time, he claimed, while expressing a hope that a foreign professor would be allowed within this decade.

19. (SBU) Bishop Kiet recalled that, during the French era, there were several other Catholic seminaries serving the north, such as in Hatay and Ha Nam provinces. The Church has requested permission from the Government Committee on Religious Affairs for another northern seminary, to be located in Thai Binh (where there is a suitable site available, he noted), but Committee officials have indicated that no additional seminary could be considered until the long-standing impasse over opening the seventh Catholic seminary (in southern Dong Nai province, where many of the northern Catholics resettled in 1954) was resolved. Bishop Kiet expressed frank puzzlement about the exact nature of the problem in Dong Nai, admitting that the Government Committee on Religious Affairs had clearly approved its establishment "in principle" several years ago.

10. (SBU) Bishop Kiet assessed that the biggest change at the Seminary over the past two decades had been a higher quality of students and the greater international exposure of the student body. He expressed a hope for continued expansion of the student body here, as well as the opening of the seminary in Thai Binh soon, in order to meet the chronic shortage of priests.

11. (SBU) Comment: Catholics in Vietnam have arguably easier relations with the GVN than their Protestant colleagues, but face the same kind of official scrutiny and oversight even the Buddhists encounter as they seek to train clergy. Apart from the civic education, the GVN appears to leave the Catholics pretty much to their own devices in undertaking their curriculum. Resources appear to be modest and the facilities basic (if once beautiful) in Hanoi. The dedication of the leaders of the northern seminary is unmistakable, as was their apparent discomfort in describing their relations with the various Committees on Religious Affairs -- even in the absence of any GVN minders.

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